

Statement of Allan D. Gilmour to the Michigan House of Representatives Commerce Committee, Hon. Frank Foster, Chair
December 3, 2014

I ask the Committee's indulgence for me to provide some personal background in the hope it will give some understanding of my position here today. At 80 years of age, I have plenty of background -- and much less future.

I retired from Ford Motor Company in 1995 as Vice Chairman and a member of the Board of Directors and, prior to that position, as President of Ford Automotive Group -- the car and truck business world-wide. I then served on the boards of directors of Whirlpool, Dow Chemical, and DTE Energy headquartered here in Michigan and as Chairman of Henry Ford Health System. I returned to Ford as Vice Chairman in 2002 during difficult times, retiring again in 2005. I became President of Wayne State University in 2010, retiring in August of 2013. I retired as Chairman of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan this past July. I live in Oakland County with my partner Eric Jirgens.

I hold a B.A. in economics from Harvard University and an M.B.A. from the University of Michigan.

I appear today to speak in favor of HB 5804 as well as HB 5959 if it is amended to add "gender identity" or "gender expression." Modernizing Michigan's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act is long overdue -- and necessary -- if Michigan is to attract and retain talent. No one should live in fear that they will lose their jobs or injure their careers should they live openly.

Before I begin my comments, I would like to share statements from other business leaders who cannot be here today but wished you to know of their support and sense of urgency as well -- Strategic Staffing Solutions, Padnos, Herman Miller, Steelcase, and Henry Ford Health System. I understand you will be hearing today from the Grand Rapids Chamber and Whirlpool as well. Never before has the business community come together in support of this issue, and I am heartened by their desire to do so and collectively convey that now is the time to act.

I grew up on a dairy farm in Vermont, and the nearest village had about 200 people. There were five people in my 8th grade class, and my high school had only about 50 students total. I learned to be private, and I learned how isolating it can be when differences are not accepted.

I came to Michigan to attend graduate school 58 years ago and have been here ever since. I was the first high-ranking auto executive to be publicly identified as gay, shortly after I retired. I spoke about this experience in an article published in FORTUNE a number of years ago and shared at that time that I did not tell my superiors or subordinates or colleagues because businesses do not want their executives to be controversial. Eventually, when I did share this information, Ford was very accepting and Ford, like many others, now have internal policies that offer explicit gender identity and the total array of non-discrimination protections.

In fact, big business has led the way. According to the Human Rights Index, which is produced annually by the Human Rights Campaign, two-thirds of the Fortune 500 offer explicit gender identity non-discrimination protections. One-third of Fortune 500 offer transgender-inclusive health care coverage, up from 0 in 2002 and nearly ten times as many businesses as five years ago. And here in Michigan an impressive number of businesses have now joined the Michigan Competitive Workforce Coalition which was formed to support the expansion of the Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act and includes many of these same companies.

I learned early, from all that background I described, that the key to success for any for-profit or non-profit organization is its talent – the people. Concepts don't develop themselves; cars don't get sold by themselves. Those that succeed are those that can get the job done, and no organization can afford to leave out a segment of the population. At Ford, back in 1960, we left out 50% of the population – women. Could we afford that? No. And I am glad that we have worked to fix that problem. And we've worked to include under-represented minorities, the disabled, veterans and other groups.

Now it is time to stop leaving out the LGBT community. We need the talent. And it is simply good business to provide protections to the LGBT community since part of the customer base for most corporations is likely gay and lesbian. It is also common sense for the State to do so as well, since many of your constituents are gay and lesbian. We must create an environment that treats people right if we are to attract and retain talent.

While the climate for diversity and inclusion in business has steadily improved, the climate in this State has not kept up. It is necessary for our elected officials to exercise leadership and transmit the message that discrimination will not be tolerated. It is my hope to see this law amended this lame duck session. This is not a matter of special rights. Discrimination and intolerance are never good business.

Finally, I want to speak to the argument that somehow providing legal protection to the LGBT community might offend the religious beliefs of some, and so any amendment should be offset by a new religious freedom restoration act. Freedom of religion is one of our most fundamental rights as Americans. That is why it is protected in the First Amendment, both in the state and federal constitutions. We live in a nation that has more religious freedom than most, and that freedom does not give us the right to harm others.

For all of these reasons, I urge you to pass this bill out of the Committee, allow the House and Senate to debate and vote, and give the Governor an opportunity to sign it into law.